Rockefeller fellows Hypotheses
History of Individual mobility awards at Rockefeller-endowed organizations 1914-1970

# Romanian Rockefeller Fellows: An Interwar Story

15/05/2026 From the data: research notes & news, Short stories: Shards from the Casa de Papel
Sonia D. Andras

In his April 1930 preface to the monograph *Prostituția și boalele venerice în România* (Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Romania, Figure 1), Romanian doctor, eugenicist, and legislator Aurel Voina outlined the organisation of a national investigation carried out with medical professionals in 1926 to analyse the prevalence of venereal diseases in Romania. Upon returning to Romania from a 1926-1927 Rockefeller fellowship in the United States, the data from that investigation had become outdated and the 1930 publication removed most of the original data to avoid redundancy, thereby reducing its originality and making it a modest resource on prostitution and venereal diseases in Romania. Although his scope was limited to compiled materials and strategic approaches, Voina maintained an optimistic outlook that future research would address the challenges of unstandardised methodologies.[1]

*Figure 1: Cover of Aurel Voina's* Prostituția și boalele venerice în România (1930)*, based on his Rockefeller-funded research. The cover carries unmistakable moral implications for the medical and eugenic debate.*

source: photography by the author

He also published a follow-up a year later, after the law to prevent and combat venereal diseases came into effect (Figure 2).[2] Voina was one of the most prominent Rockefeller fellows in interwar Romania, involved in various scientific, cultural, medical, and political organisations, with a strong inclination towards the far right.[3] His ideological radicalisation peaked with the extreme right-wing National Legionnaire State, which

aligned with Nazi Germany in 1940-1941.[4] After 1948, when Romania became a People's Republic, he gradually faded from public view, having renounced his explicit eugenicist statements.

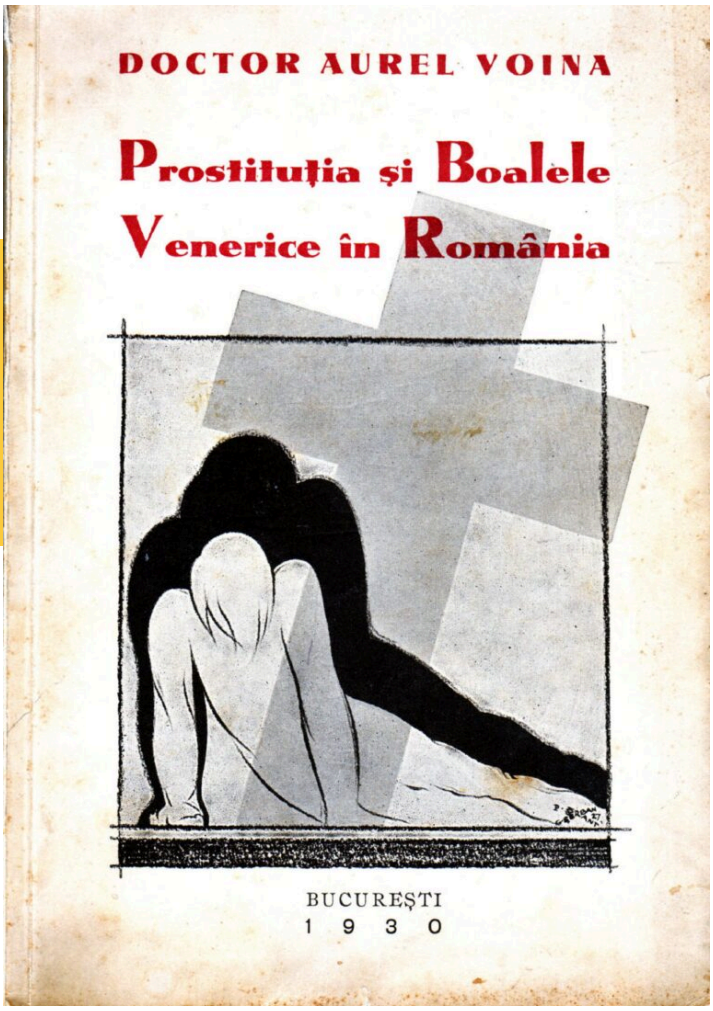



*Figure 2: Title page of Voina's follow-up* Combaterea boalelor venerice*, which outlined practical medical and lawmaking steps for preventing and combatting venereal diseases in Romania.*

*Source: photograph by the author*

But the relationship between the Rockefeller Foundation (RF)and its Romanian contacts runs deeper and wider than support for promising so-called medical and political men. RF's interest in Romania began with its emphasis towards Eastern Europe after the First World War.[5] Within the postwar landscape, interwar Romania's effort to forge its identity as an expanded territory faced a series of challenges across the ideological and morality spectrum. Historically known as Greater Romania, it transitioned from an ethno-linguistic to an ethno-nationalist identity, influenced by Wilsonian ideals and support from organisations like the Rockefeller Foundation. During the interwar era, the Foundation's efforts had a notable worldwide influence by advancing public health and nursing education through reforms that built local capacity using evidence-based approaches. Romanian officials utilised American aid for post-war reconstruction, coordinating with a range of health organisations, including the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), to improve public health, promote national growth, and establish scholarship programs.[6] All these efforts then had a catalysing effect on health policies, social services, and workforce development, with particular focus on eugenics, population control, and hygiene. In fact, right-wing groups promoted ideas of racial purity under the pretence of public health.[7] This relationship between Romanian political, cultural, medical, scientific and intellectual authorities remains complex and expands beyond the ideological scope of men in power, as it extends to the auxiliary staff, including nurses, and, eventually to the general population.

RF's official activities in Romania kicked off in 1923, although scouting efforts had started since at least 1922.[8] The Foundation's interests aligned with Romania's emerging educational reforms.[9] In 1923, the RF formally initiated collaboration with local leaders, including the then-Romanian justice minister Gheorghe Mârzescu, with a focus on state-building and societal rehabilitation.[10] The Foundation individual mobility awards were immediately enlisted in this collaboration with two fellowship appointments in 1923 (two medical doctors connected to the University of Bucharest).[11] In the following year, the Foundation awarded 206 fellowships altogether, 8 of which to Romania. This does not seem very significant, but one should mention that these 8 fellowships were provided by the Division of Medical Education (DME), which distributed 77 fellowships that year: Romania was the beneficiary of a sizeable portion indeed, just over one tenth of these. Until 1927, Romania remained a priority for the DME, and was only second to Germany in the total of DME fellowships during those 4 years.[12] These were also the years when Romania began standardising curricula nationwide and expanding educational, bureaucratic and vocational training programs to improve professional and clerical education.[13] From 1926, other Rockefeller Foundation divisions distributed fellowships to Romanian nurses, public health specialists, social scientists, mathematicians, physicists, plant scientists. These individual mobility grants were distributed in Romania from 1923 to 1939, with a peak in 1929, for a grand total of 88 (see Figure 3).[14] No other fellowships were provided after the Second World War, unlike for other communist countries like Hungary or Poland.

Figure 3: fellowships for Romania, Rockefeller Foundation, 1923-1939

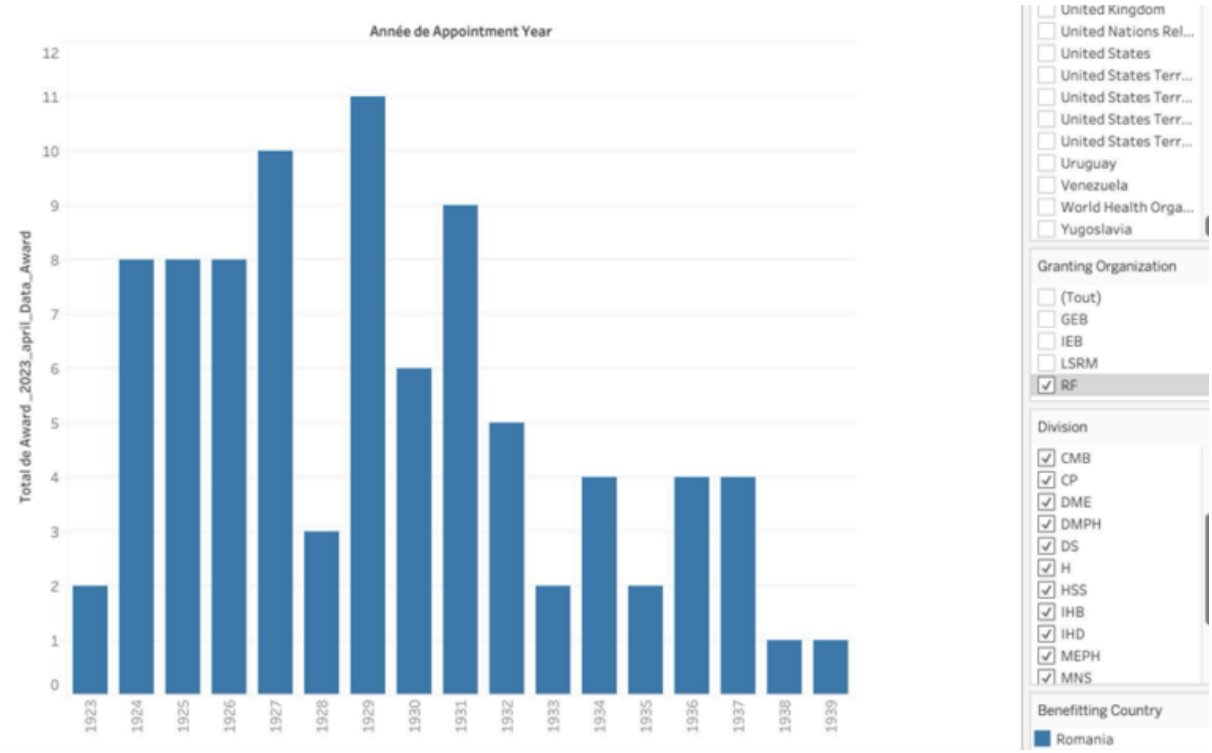



*Figure 1: RF fellowships in Romania 1923-1939*

*Source: Rockefeller fellows database.*

Roughly three quarters of these beneficiaries were men, with nurses the most important group of female recipients (15 out of 20 women). The largest chunk of fellowships were distributed by the different successive RF divisions that handled medicine and public health, which counted for 76% of the 88 fellows.[15] This share is higher for Romania than that of the total number of Rockefeller Foundation fellowships distributed between 1923 and 1939. This focus is underlined when one considers a preliminary distribution by study fields for Romanian fellowships: medicine, epidemiology, nursing, chemistry, biochemistry, and life sciences count for 70% of fellowships. Once again, this share is superior to that of the entire set of fellowships. Yet, fellowships in the social sciences increased in number during the 1930s, for a total of 15: jurists, economists, statisticians, social workers, with several recipients affiliated with the Romanian Social Institute (Institutul Social Român) in Bucharest.[16] A much smaller group received fellowships in chemistry, mathematics or plant studies.

In addition, and in connection, with these individual grants, the Rockefeller Foundation helped establish the Romanian Social Institute in Bucharest, the Institute of Hygiene in Cluj, the Demographic Statistics Service (later the Institute of Demography and Census), and several hygiene, nursing, medical assistance, and social science institutions in Bucharest and Cluj.[17] Among the recipients, several later became prominent Romanian intellectuals and scientists, including Anton Golopenţia (Sociology and Demography), Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (Statistics and Economics) and Grigore Moisil (Mathematics and Logic). The director of the Demographic Statistics Service and Institute of Demography and Census was another Rockefeller fellow, Sabin Manuilă (Hygiene).

The Rockefeller Foundation, through its health and hygiene initiatives linked to eugenics, relied on officer reports for evaluations and recognitions, while the initial assessment of fellows remained within Romanian institutions. One of the main contact persons was Iuliu Moldovan, a prominent eugenicist who is frequently mentioned in Rockefeller Foundation records. Apart from his personal and ideological objectives, the Rockefeller Foundation considered him an ideal intermediary responsible for identifying and promoting tal-

ent to advance the Romanian academic, scientific, and medical systems, including contemporary nursing education and sociology.[18]

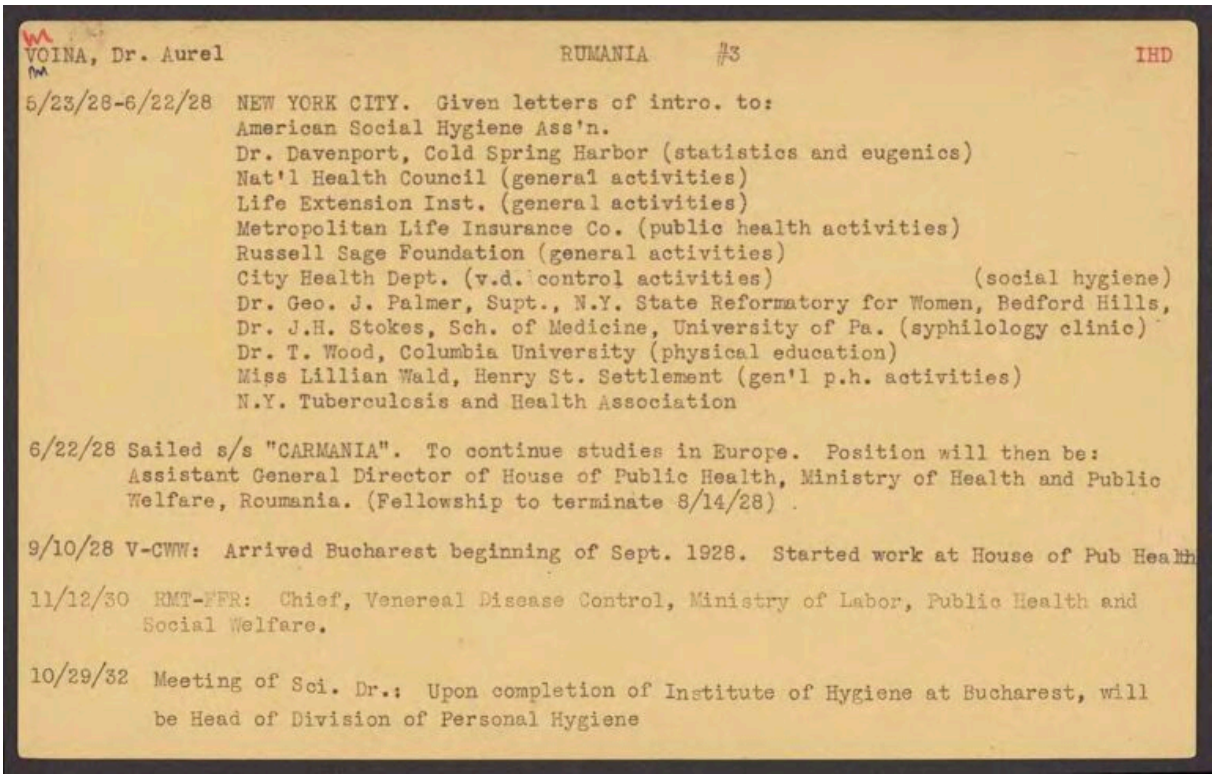
However, the connection with eugenics and right-wing thought in interwar Romania remains a crucial component of the Romania-Rockefeller connection. Interwar Romanian discourse became increasingly aggressive and less centred on health and aesthetics, amid expanded public education campaigns. The promotion of eugenics grew more politicised, aligning closer to far-right movements as the 1930s progressed into the Second World War.[19]

Both Aurel Voina and Moldovan, senior members of the Transylvanian Astra Association in Cluj, embody the complexities of that milieu. Despite its overt dedication to Romanian literature and culture, the Association had its own biopolitics department, where Moldovan and Voina held significant positions and were actively involved.[20] As a physician, eugenicist, cosmetologist, and self-proclaimed expert on fashion and beauty, he influenced medical practice, eugenic thinking, health and hygiene education, cosmetic legislation, and contemporary views on women's fashion, attractiveness, and health. Interwar Romanian eugenics was linked to social medicine, nationalism, modernity, and political radicalism, emphasizing returning to traditional gender roles in a healthy society. Romanian eugenics received international backing, particularly from the Rockefeller Foundation, to establish its academic and institutional foundations. Unlike Voina, interwar Romanian adherents to eugenic thought, including endocrinologist Constantin Ion Parhon also thrived during Communism. But like Moldovan, Parhon was not a Rockefeller fellow himself, although he was known by the Foundation and respected as the founder of Romania's endocrinology school.

Aurel Voina exemplifies Rockefeller support for specialised training in Hygiene and Epidemiology with important impact on the expanding public health and hygiene system and legislation in interwar Romania. Following his Rockefeller fellowship, he emerged as a leading eugenics advocate, in interwar Romania and into the Second World War, before later reinventing himself as a less prominent but still active medical professional during the Communist era.

In 1930, Voina seems to have been be worried that his 3-years old research data was redundant. Yet, others still found his findings relevant. In February 1930, about two months before the dated introduction -and thus the publication of the book in Romania, the *Journal of Social Hygiene* published a review signed J. P. B. -likely Jean B. Pinney, the journal's editor.[21] The *Journal* was published by the American Social Hygiene Association, an association created in 1913 to combat venereal disease, with an emphasis on sex education at school.[22] The association received funding both from John D. Rockefeller Jr, the leading profile in the Rockefeller family philanthropic activities from the 1910s, and from the Foundation itself. During his fellowship time, the RF provided Voina with several letters of introduction, in order for him to become familiar with a number of organizations in his field (see figure 2). The association was one of them.Although we cannot state that Voina immediately sent his published volume to the *Journal*, it is reasonable to suggest that the publication of the review was at least partially attributable to connections forged during his fellowship. These connections likely encompassed both the American public debate on social hygiene and interactions with particular individuals and institutions.

*Figure 2: Aurel Voina fellowship recorder card, page 4*



VOINA, Dr. Aurel RUMANIA #3 IHD

5/23/28-6/22/28 NEW YORK CITY. Given letters of intro. to:
American Social Hygiene Ass'n.
Dr. Davenport, Cold Spring Harbor (statistics and eugenics)
Nat'l Health Council (general activities)
Life Extension Inst. (general activities)
Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. (public health activities)
Russell Sage Foundation (general activities)
City Health Dept. (v.d. control activities) (social hygiene)
Dr. Geo. J. Palmer, Supt., N.Y. State Reformatory for Women, Bedford Hills,
Dr. J.H. Stokes, Sch. of Medicine, University of Pa. (syphilology clinic)
Dr. T. Wood, Columbia University (physical education)
Miss Lillian Wald, Henry St. Settlement (gen'l p.h. activities)
N.Y. Tuberculosis and Health Association

6/22/28 Sailed s/s "CARMANIA". To continue studies in Europe. Position will then be:
Assistant General Director of House of Public Health, Ministry of Health and Public
Welfare, Roumania. (Fellowship to terminate 8/14/28)

9/10/28 V-CWW: Arrived Bucharest beginning of Sept. 1928. Started work at House of Pub Health

11/12/30 RMT-FFR: Chief, Venereal Disease Control, Ministry of Labor, Public Health and
Social Welfare.

10/29/32 Meeting of Sci. Dr.: Upon completion of Institute of Hygiene at Bucharest, will
be Head of Division of Personal Hygiene

*Source: Fellowship recorder card for Aurel Voina, Rockefeller Foundation records, R.G.10.2.© Courtesy of Rockefeller Archive Center*

The review introduced Voina as a senior Romanian health official influenced by American public health strategies. J. P. B. stated he claimed syphilis and gonorrhoea caused roughly 25,000 child deaths annually in Romania. J. P. B. noted he linked their postwar increase to family breakdown and sexual immorality, deeming regulated prostitution a key source of infection. J. P. B. concluded by noting Romania's focus on venereal diseases and that the Ministry's control programme employed educational, medical, legislative, sanitary, and socioeconomic measures based on the American plan (i.e., that of the Association). Publishing the review was advantageous for both parties: it promoted Voina's work and name to the Journal readership and validated the Association's efforts through a foreign endorsement.

▼

1. Aurel Voina, *Prostituția și boalele venerice în România*, Bucharest, F. Göbl and Sons Royal Court Publishing House, 1930, p. IV. ↩
2. Voina, *Combaterea boalelor venerice*, Bucharest Regia M.O., National Printing House, 1931. ↩
3. See Voina, *Igiena – pentru clasa a VIII-a secundară de băieți și fete*, 3rd edn, Bucharest, Cugetarea – Georgescu Delafras, 1941, interim. ↩
4. Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002. ↩
5. Cornel Sigmirean & Carmen Andraș, "Negocieri Academice Româno-Americane: Sabin Manuilă În Arhivele Fundației Rockefeller," *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane »Gheorghe Șincai« al Academiei Române*, 25, 2022, pp. 191–210, p. 192, https://doi.org/10.59277/icsugh.sincai.25.15. ↩
6. Doina Anca Creţu, *Foreign Aid and State Building in Interwar Romania: In Quest of an Ideal*, Stanford Studies on Central and Eastern Europe, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2025, p. 2. ↩
7. Bucur, "Romania", in: Kevin Passmore (ed.) *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919 – 45*, Pittsburgh & Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 57–78, pp. 61–63. ↩
8. Grigore T. Popa, "Fundația Rockefeller în slujba omenirii", *Universul Literar*, 63: 9, 1945, pp. 6–8, p. 6. ↩
9. Simona Szakács, *Europe in the Classroom: World Culture and Nation-Building in Post-Socialist Romania*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 66–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60258-5. ↩

10. Crețu, *Foreign Aid and State Building in Interwar Romania*, pp. 1–2. ↩
11. The figures come from the Rockefeller Fellows database and have been extracted by Pierre-Yves Saunier. Only certain types of individual mobility awards are included in this database (travel grants and nurse visitor grants have been left out for reasons of information consistency). ↩
12. 25 for Romania, 26 for Germany. The following country was Hungary with 22. ↩
13. Irina Livezeanu, C*ultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 112. ↩
14. 13 other fellowships were distributed to Romanians by other Rockefeller-endowed organizations. The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, that operated mostly in the social sciences, provided two between 1926 and 1928. 11 others were bestowed by the International Education Board, which specialized in the natural sciences, mathematics and physics. ↩
15. The International health board changed name to International health division in 1927, the Division of medical education to Division of medical studies in 1929. ↩
16. Raluca Mușat, "Making the Countryside Global: The Bucharest School of Sociology and International Networks of Knowledge". *Contemporary European History*. 28: 2, 2019, p. 205-219, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26852425. ↩
17. Sigmirean & C. Andraș, "Negocieri Academice", p. 196. ↩
18. Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania*, pp. 60–61. ↩
19. S. Andraș, 'Nurse Between the Lines: Romanian Female Rockefeller Foundation Fellows in Medical Professions in-between Innovation and Suppression', *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane »Gheorghe Şincai« al Academiei Române*, 28, 2025, pp. 83–118, pp. 109–110, https://doi.org/10.59277/ICSUGh.Sincai.28.04. ↩
20. Sonia D. Andraș, 'Nursing Education in Cluj with Rockefeller Foundation Support, 1924-1948', in *Elita interbelică transilvană. Reconfigurări culturale și identitare*, ed. Cornel Sigmirean and Corina Mașca (Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2025), pp. 153–186. ↩
21. J. B. P., "Prostitutia si boalele in Romania (Prostitution and the Venereal Diseases in Roumania)", *Journal of Social Hygiene*,18:2, 1930, p. 120. ↩
22. About the association and its different ties to the Rockefeller universe, see Blackman, Kayla. "Public power, private matters: The American Social Hygiene Association and the policing of sexual health in the Progressive era." (MA Thesis, University of Montana, 2014) , https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5318&context=etd, and Michael Imber "The First World War, Sex Education, and the American Social Hygiene Association's Campaign Against Venereal Disease", *Journal of Educational Administration* and History, 16: 1, 1984, p. 47-56, https://doi.org/10.1080/0022062840160106 ↩

The text only may be used under licence Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial Share Alike 4.0 International. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

**OpenEdition suggests that you cite this post as follows:**
Sonia D. Andras (May 15, 2026). Romanian Rockefeller Fellows: An Interwar Story. *Rockefeller fellows*. Retrieved May 19, 2026 from https://doi.org/10.58079/16833

## *About Sonia D. Andras*

I am a MSCA Seal of Excellence awardee, currently a Research Fellow at the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pisa, Italy. I received my PhD in 2020 from the University of the Arts London. I am the author of "The Women of 'Little Paris': Fashion in Interwar Bucharest" (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024, Dress Cultures series). Use the code "GLR AT8" for 35% off your purchase on the Bloomsbury website.  View all posts by Sonia D. Andras →